



REFRAMING DOUGLAS

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The story a community tells itself is a combination of real and imagined history, the geography of place, what people think and feel, and what outsiders say. The story told about Douglas, Arizona, is often of a fading community with nothing to do, see, or keep people there. And much like the legend of Pancho Villa riding his horse up the Gadsden Hotel staircase, that story is untrue but gets retold anyway.

The Douglas Arizona Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) Team, composed of Jenae Sanchez, David Tarullo, Jose Pedro Teran, Arturo Escallante, Estrella Esquilin, and Alex! Jimenez, started their project with a question: How can creative engagement renew the small town's interest in their own cultural expression and history? The answer was Re-Framing Douglas, a public art project that brought together the business, education, and nonprofit sectors in Douglas and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico.

Project artists Jimenez and Esquilin led observational walks to see what community members saw and conversations to hear what community members thought and felt about their towns. People of all ages were engaged in the process.

Students from one high school participated in a multi-day session, including an observational walk that led to the selection of the historic Gadsden Hotel as one of the locations for the finished artworks. "The students really enjoyed what they learned about the Hotel Gadsden, and they really liked the history of it and the lore behind it, because there are a lot of the stories about the Gadsden, the ghosts and the celebrities, its past" said Jimenez "We let the groups that we were leading chose the site (for the art). So, the group that I was leading chose the Gadsden."

Teran added, "[The students] were very proud of finding out what

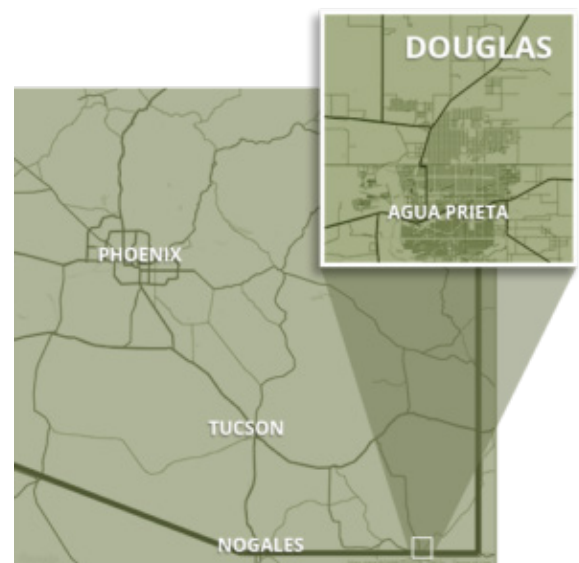


Photo: Children interacting with sculptures during the G Ave. Street Fair. Photo by M. Jenea Sanchez.

they can do. Some of them were doing the drawings of the Gadsden Hotel. I really believe that the students [gained] knowledge of what an artist does, thinking outside the box.”

Families, business people, and nonprofit staff and volunteers were engaged through cafecitas, town halls, and conversations on the street. “Sometimes we were hearing responses that made us think maybe we should re-orient people’s perspectives on the fact that this is actually a really special place as it is and it can only get better,” said Esquilin. “We thought, ‘What would it look like if we just highlighted the great things that we see here and if we don’t have to do anything to make it better?’ It already is a great place. It’s really the people that make this place.”



Team Douglas: Jose Pedro Teran, Jenea Sanchez, David Tarullo, Estrella Esquilin, and Alex! Jimenez

The two artists used the community conversations as the inspirations for their designs and worked with Tarullo and students from Cochise College to fabricate the final sculptures. “The work that we did with the students from the college made me realize that the fabrication unit of the college, which is very into the functional, you know exact welds, also is interested in art,” said Tarullo. “It was pretty cool to see these same students get really excited about making something that wasn’t just about technical, their technical prowess or technical abilities.”

The finished sculptures are literal frames that people can touch, move, and manipulate to see Douglas in a different way. Residents and visitors are encouraged to interact with the works to pause and reflect on the town’s unique characteristics and history. According to Jimenez, her piece is like a Viewfinder that puts historical scenes onto the modern-day street, using silhouettes to overlay images on top of actual reality and bring historical characters and scenes into the everyday, so that you can see them together. “The piece both highlights things about the Gadsden [Hotel] since it is located across from it, but also G Avenue [Douglas’ main street] since it is right on G Avenue,” she said.

Esquilin’s sculpture is like a spyglass through which one can view the natural environment, with a base that features plants and birds that are native to the area. “My original concept drawings were binoculars. It’s a surveillance tool—it could be birding, it could be [border] surveillance. It’s a way to observe and so I thought, ‘How can I

create something that maybe can re-contextualize that tool to be positive,” she said. “Mr. Teran’s granddaughter... put the spyglass next to her face and said, ‘I’m watching you.’ How scary that would sound if you heard it from someone else, but hearing it from a child is beautiful, you know, and she’s seeing the world differently.”

She was inspired by nature and community surrounding Castro Park that they observed during walks through the area. “When I was walking by myself, I noticed how comfortable everything felt and how peaceful it felt at the park and it was one of the first places actually that Sanchez, Jimenez, and I walked together. We saw all kinds of families come and go, kids, you know, high school students passing through the park and I knew it was a special place, and it was really great that when we created the workshops...my group ended up [at Castro Park]. Almost everybody I talked to had some sort of story [about the park],” Esquilin said.

The team unveiled their works in progress on a warm October day at the G Avenue Festival, with music, food, crafts, and classic cars. It was a day for chatting with neighbors, hanging out with friends, and being with family. The students who were involved in the initial observational walks were there. Teran said that they were very excited to see the project, and to see their comments reflected in the artwork.

Sanchez noted that the community is hungry for art conversations, arts opportunities, and public art. “I was observing a few families around the sculptures; it was an inter-generational family, it looked like a grandmother, kids, and grandkids. And they were talking about the Gadsden,” Sanchez said. “I said, ‘Did you know that this is the second iteration of the Gadsden?’ The grandparents knew but nobody else did, right. I felt like there was a nice moment. These sculptures are that: They are opportunities for families to have conversations about things, you know, that have kind of faded away.”

And, perhaps, to create new stories to share.



Artist Estrella Esquilin teaches workshop participants how to develop cyanotype during the unveiling of CCI sculptures.
Photo by M. Jenea Sanchez.